



ANEC Statement on accessibility of voting

***For many European voters, the question is which party to vote for.
But for others, it is how to vote.***

From 4 to 7 June 2009, millions of citizens will have the chance to vote in the elections to the European Parliament. Most will be able to cast their votes without problem. But others will find themselves disenfranchised through reasons of older age or disability. And they constitute more than 10% of voters.

ANEC believes all those entitled to vote should be able to do so. And in secret. Modern solutions and standards should be used to help everyone exercise democratic choice.

Access to on-line information material and eVoting systems

There is no unified European electoral law as many details are decided at the national level. The use of electronic voting is one aspect that depends on the national, or even regional, rules¹.

Today's technology allows votes to be cast through the internet, portable devices, even interactive television and mobile phones. For example, Estonia was the first European country to permit internet voting in October 2005 for local elections². This was possible through most of the population having an electronic identity card so facilitating voter identification and security of the vote. However, the use of electronic voting systems, based on internet or on touch screens, can be particularly challenging for people with visual impairments. If the colour contrast of the screen is not good, or the web page

¹ In some EU countries eVoting systems are not used. In such cases, templates should be available for voters with visual impairments in order to help them fill in the paper ballot from.

² Access to eVoting for persons with a reading handicap, Prof. Jan Engelen, Kath.Univ. Leuven, 2008

cannot be read by the special software used by blind people (known as the screen reader), a person with visual impairment cannot vote independently.

In ANEC's opinion, the usual problems of access to mainstream electronic products and services can be found in the systems used for electronic voting. But the chance to vote is a democratic right. And it should be exercised independently.

Moreover, much electoral material is not accessible to disabled people. According to a survey carried on by the Belgian association of disabled people in 2006, most visually impaired voters had problems to familiarise themselves with campaign material due to websites not allowing access or documents being printed in too small a font³.

Of seven European political parties, none declared their website to be compliant with the web accessibility standards (WCAG 0.1-0.2)⁴.

The recent US Presidential Election demonstrated that citizens are increasingly turning to websites as a source of information or political networking. The use of Web 2.0 and new social networking technologies by the Obama campaign has transformed political dynamics. Obama's Facebook page had 2.6 million fans. YouTube users spent 14.5 million hours watching official Obama campaign videos. ANEC believes it essential to ensure such technologies are accessible to all citizens, whatever their age and abilities.

What can be done?

eVoting systems are bought by authorities through public procurement procedures. According to the European Public Procurement Directives, it is possible to integrate social considerations - and specifically Design for All and Accessibility requirements - in the contracts for public bids⁵. ANEC urges the development of accessibility standards which can be cited in the tenders for eVoting systems.⁶

The advent of Web 2.0, which brings new opportunities of user interaction, reaffirms the need for more web accessibility. ANEC calls for electoral material on-line to be made accessible. This is part of our long-standing request for a horizontal legislative framework able to address the accessibility of ICT products and services, including web accessibility⁷.

³ <http://www.gamah.be/index.html>

⁴ Web-sites checked on 17 May 2009

⁵ Directive 2004/18/EC of 31 March 2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 31 March 2004 on the coordination of procedures for the award of public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contracts, OJ L 134/114 of 30 April 2004.

⁶ Second phase of Standardisation mandate M376 in support of European accessibility requirements for public procurement of products and services in the ICT domain

⁷ Joint ANEC/EDF Position paper on eAccessibility, Nov 07 , ANEC-DFA-2007-G-057final, Joint ANEC – EDF position on Web- and eAccessibility legislation, ANEC-DFA-2008-G-030, July 2008; Final AGE/ANEC/EDF joint position on EC communication on eAccessibility, Feb 09, ANEC-DFA-2009-G-004final

Access to voting premises

It should not be forgotten that, in order to exercise their right to vote, citizens need to be able to access the premises where elections take place, generally public buildings such as schools and town halls.

Accessibility to the built environment is one of ANEC's main priorities. We are currently contributing to a draft international standard on access to the built environment, which should be adopted soon⁸. Regarding the applicability of the future standard to existing buildings - such as town halls - we believe care must be taken to ensure that 'buildings listed as having significant heritage value' are still made as accessible as possible.

What can be done?

ANEC calls for work on access to the built environment to start as soon as possible at the European level⁹. Standards are needed in the framework of public procurement procedures in order to help public authorities define accessibility criteria in their public tenders. How to assess if a ramp is not too steep? And at which height should the handle be placed on a door for a wheelchair user to be able to use it?

ANEC in Brief

ANEC is the European consumer voice in standardisation, representing and defending consumer interests in the development of technical standards, in the application of certification schemes to standards, and in the creation or revision of legislation on products and services. ANEC brings together national consumer organisations from the EU Member States and EFTA countries in order to define European positions on matters affecting consumer protection and welfare. ANEC receives funding from the European Commission's DG SANCO and the EFTA Secretariat. It relies too on the participation of volunteer experts which is considered a contribution in kind. Consumer participation in standardisation is crucial. Consumer representation complements the business view, and goods and services based on standards developed with effective consumer participation can be more easily accepted in the market place. In the EU context, consumers ensure that the public interest is represented in the standardisation work that complements European legislation and broader public policy initiative.

www.anec.eu

⁸ ISO/CD 21542, ISO/TC 59 / SC 16

⁹ Standardisation mandate M420 in support of accessibility requirements for public procurement in the built environment, December 2007